



June 11, 2008

Too late — this time — for split-state brucellosis plan

There's no point levying blame for Montana's imminent loss of brucellosis-free status after a Paradise Valley heifer was found to have the disease this week.

Even if the state and ranch organizations had pursued a "split-state" strategy when the idea surfaced last year in an attempt to protect most of the state's cattle growers, the plan wouldn't have been in place in time to head off the penalty triggered by this week's case.

At least that's what Errol D. Rice, executive director of the Montana Stockgrowers Association, said Monday after Gov. Brian Schweitzer laid the statewide loss of brucellosis-free status at the feet of the MSA.

The organization last year opposed drawing a line around the Yellowstone Park area to split it off for the purpose of keeping brucellosis-free status in the rest of the state. The MSA objected that it seemed to declare Yellowstone Park and its environs a sacrifice area.

All the same, the strategy might have worked for the rest of the state's cattle industry if approved in time. Rice said there's no way the strategy would have been in place before this week's new case of brucellosis.

In May 2007, brucellosis was identified in several cattle in a herd near Bridger, and some of those animals were traced to a ranch near Emigrant, in the Paradise Valley north of Yellowstone Park.

Despite those cases, Montana could have maintained its brucellosis-free status if no other cases had surfaced in the state for two years. Unfortunately, the case confirmed Monday automatically triggers loss of that status.

That will mean new procedures, testing and vaccinations, including quarantines for herds with links to the infected heifer.

Ironically, the feds earlier this year announced that the entire nation was free of brucellosis for the first time since 1934.

Not any more.

Montana ranchers' challenge now will be to get the brucellosis-free classification back — and the state says they can't even apply for it until *next* May.

Further, maintaining the classification could be difficult as long as a significant portion of the wildlife in the Yellowstone area is infected with the disease.

Brucellosis affects cattle and swine, but also is common in elk and bison.

It can cause cows to abort their first calves, and very rarely can spread to humans.

It's too late for this instance, but we still believe the split-state strategy is sound, especially considering the relatively small number of cattle in the Yellowstone Park area and the size — and value — of the bison and elk herds there.